



UDC 808:811.111'36

Original scientific paper

Accepted for publication on 26 September 2003

## Metonymic motivation in English grammar: The case of the TENSE-ASPECT-MOOD system

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It is traditionally assumed that metonymy plays hardly any role outside the lexicon, and is thus largely irrelevant to grammar. The present paper attempts to show the contrary: that metonymy has a series of long-ranging ramifications in the grammatical system. By specifically considering the role of metonymy in motivating certain phenomena in the English TENSE-ASPECT-MOOD (TAM) system, the paper demonstrates that the metonymic operations at play in this system form an orderly and internally coherent system.

### 1. Introduction

Three elements seem to be part and parcel of most classic definitions of metonymy. Firstly, the usual *genus proximum* is that it is a figure of speech or poetic figure. This element of definition of metonymy has been massively challenged by cognitive linguistics ever since the late 1970s (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Both metaphor and metonymy are now seen as basic and ubiquitous cognitive processes that pervade all our thinking, speaking and acting.

As their *differentia specifica*, such traditional definitions mention one or both of the remaining two properties. One focuses on what goes on in metonymies, the other on what metonymies do. A standard ingredient of traditional definitions of metonymy is a statement on what makes it different from a non-figurative expression, viz. that it is a stand-in-for type of relationship of the whole for part type. In other words, a linguistic expression denoting a part of a larger whole is substituted by another expression denoting the whole. Finally, being on such traditional accounts primarily figures of speech, metonymies effect a shift of meaning whereby the metonymically used expression comes to mean something else than what it usually means, specifically it assumes the meaning of the expression it stands for.



The former property has recently come under scrutiny of cognitive linguistics, and it appears that metonymy can involve a range of relationships, not only whole for part, or part for whole (traditional synecdoche), but also part for part relationship. The latter feature rests on a number of tacit assumptions. Most importantly, it is received wisdom that metonymic shifts primarily affect the lexical meaning. One would therefore expect that metonymy is largely irrelevant to grammar.

By advancing evidence against the tacit assumptions mentioned above, viz. by showing that metonymy is a far more ubiquitous and pervasive cognitive process than usually thought, and that it is active not only in the lexicon but in the grammatical system as well, I further lay bare the untenability of the first element. At a more general level, I demonstrate at the same time that boundaries between lexicon, grammar (and pragmatics, because metonymic phenomena spill over into areas traditionally considered to be the domain of pragmatics) are largely artificial if one assumes a cognitive linguistic perspective on language.

By specifically considering the role of metonymy in shaping the English TENSE-ASPECT-MOOD (TAM) system I show that:

- 1) not only individual lexical morphemes, but also whole grammatical constructions may be involved,
- 2) not only the lexical meaning is affected but also the grammatical meaning, i.e. the value of lexemes for certain grammatical categories, is affected in the course of metonymic mappings.

By way of providing a background for these case studies, I review some fundamental cognitive linguistic assumptions about metonymy (and contrast this cognitive process with metaphor) in Section 2. In Section 3 I discuss the role of metonymy in the grammatical system of English verbs. I first show that metonymies can be predicational and then proceed to consider how the TAM system of English verbs is shaped by conceptual metonymies.

## 2. On metonymies (and metaphors) in cognitive linguistics

### 2.1. *Conceptual metonymies (vs. metaphors)*

The last thirty years have seen the emergence of a cognitive approach to linguistics that views metaphor and metonymy not just as figures of speech, i.e. just as words or phrases, and not as necessarily being parasitic on literal meaning - metaphor and metonymy are approached as conceptual processes of extension, i.e. they are not so much relationships between words as relationships between concepts. One conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target. Understood in this fashion, metaphor and metonymy are among the most basic and the most frequent processes underlying much of human language, involving numerous linguistic phenomena ranging from categorization and reference to predication to speech acts.



A fairly frequent way of defining the two phenomena has been to contrast them with respect to two central points of difference, although it has been repeatedly claimed that the borderline between the two is blurred (cf. Barcelona 2000, Ruiz de Mendoza 2000, and Radden 2002). On the one hand, it is widely accepted that, metonymy is based on contiguity, whereas metaphor is based on similarity (cf. Ullmann 1962: 212, Taylor 1989: 122). On the other hand, the two differ in terms of the number of conceptual entities involved.

Metaphors are often considered to be shortened similes, i.e. two entities are compared, but there are no function words that would make this comparison explicit. In other words, something is described by stating another thing with which it is implicitly compared:

- (1) a. For the most part, the *father* of video art comes off as an unexpectedly slight figure, a likable, playful avant-gardist whose imaginative resources have seldom matched his commitment to the idea of innovation.
- b. They decided to put a *ceiling* on the income of party leaders. (Deignan 1995: 63)

In the first example above, the person who invented video art is presented as a figurative progenitor, the person who introduces a new way of doing something or a new way of thinking, and from whom something develops. Similarly, in (1) b. *ceiling* is used to denote an upper limit on income because ceilings are horizontal surfaces that are the top part of rooms and thus form their upper boundary.

Metonymy, on the other hand, is traditionally approached as a stand-for relationship that is, unlike metaphor, not based on similarity but on contiguity or proximity. This means that metonyms are expressions that are used instead of some other expressions because the latter are associated with or suggested by the former:

- (2) a. He was testifying on the *Hill* earlier in the week.
- b. He emigrated to *America* in 1969.

In (2) a. *the Hill*, short for *Capitol Hill*, is not used to denote this particular location in Washington, i.e. the hill where the Capitol building stands, or not even so much this particular building as the institution of the US Congress which meets in this building. In (2) b. *America* is not used in its most proper sense, to denote the whole continent, but rather just the United States of America.

Synecdoche is a figure of speech that is sometimes distinguished from metonymy. In this case, an expression referring to a part is used to refer to some larger whole, e.g.:

- (3) One of those singled out for merciless treatment was Alexander Slepinin, nicknamed the Colonel, a three-hundred-pound, six-foot-five *black belt* who claimed to have served with the Russian Special Forces in Afghanistan.

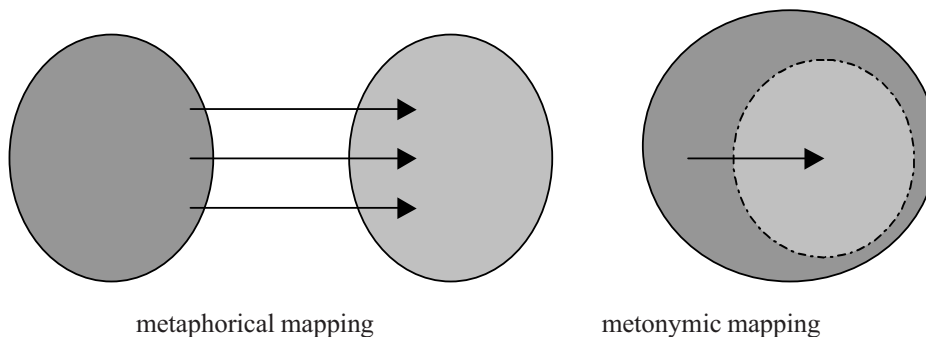
Here the expression *black belt* is used to denote the person who has gained a black belt as a sign of a high achievement in karate or judo, i.e. to qualify its owner as a very



skilful fighter. Synecdoches are in cognitive linguistics considered just a subtype of metonymies.

The notion of contiguity is taken in its broadest sense to cover all associative relations except similarity, and may thus be too vague a notion, making metonymy almost a cognitive wastebasket. Panther and Thornburg (2002: 282) attempt to constrain the scope of metonymy by submitting that the relation between the metonymic source and the target is contingent, i.e. it does not exist by conceptual necessity. When a nurse, for example, refers to a patient as *the ulcer in room 506*, it is not conceptually necessary for the ulcer to belong to the patient in room 506. Metonymic relation is thus in principle defeasible or cancellable, because the source concept is still usually retrievable (though backgrounded), even if the target concept is conventionalized in the lexicon.

The other important point of contrast concerns the number of conceptual entities involved and the number of elements linked by the two operations. The conceptual entities involved may belong to the same domain (or idealized cognitive model, also called script, scenario, or frame in cognitive linguistic literature) or to different domains. If they belong to two different, discrete domains, we have a metaphor, if they, on the other hand, belong to the same domain, we are dealing with metonymy. Metaphors typically employ a more concrete concept or domain as source in order to structure a more abstract concept or domain as target. The mappings are unidirectional, and the source and target are not reversible (cf. Kövecses 2002: 6). This is not necessarily the case with metonymies. Metonymic mappings can proceed in either direction, from the more concrete part of the domain (subdomain) to the more abstract one and the other way round. Metaphors may work on the basis of a set of correspondences (though some may exploit only one), while metonymic mappings are based on a single correspondence (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza and Peña 2002).





The differences between the two types of mappings can be presented schematically as follows:

Metonymy is defined as “a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same domain, or ICM” (Kövecses and Radden 1998: 39). This may be illustrated with a simple example such as:

- (4) *The Kremlin* has officially anointed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin the official successor to Boris Yeltsin, and the war in Chechnya should ensure his victory in the presidential election in June 2000.

Because the Kremlin is the area in Moscow in which government buildings are concentrated it has been traditionally used to refer to the centre of political power in the former USSR and Russia.

According to Radden and Kövecses (1999), there are three general types of metonymic mappings. In two of these, the whole ICM and its part(s) are involved, i.e. part-for-whole and whole-for-part metonymies. In the third type parts of an ICM are involved so that one part stands for another part. Ruiz de Mendoza (2000), however, suggests that these can be reduced to just two types: either the source of the metonymic mapping is contained in the target (source-in-target metonymy) or the target is in the source (target-in-source metonymy).

## 2.2. Metonymy (vs. metaphor) in grammar

While both metaphor and metonymy are recognized in cognitive linguistics as basic processes, it is remarkable that they have been seen as playing very different roles in the organization of the grammatical component. Metaphorical extensions are extensively assumed to have taken place in almost all areas of grammar, making it possible to account for scores of phenomena in an intuitively appealing way. A few of the more widely known examples include the following: metaphorical extensions in the modality subsystem (the development of epistemic modality out of deontic one, as first argued for by Sweetser 1990), the use of grammatical morphemes such as past tense markers in English (Taylor 1989: 149), the grammaticalization of the *going to*-future from the verb + adverbial construction (Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer 1991: 241ff), the extension of transitive (Taylor 1989: 206ff) and ditransitive constructions (Goldberg 1995).

It is true that linguists have so far paid much less attention to metonymy than to metaphor in general. A shift in the focus of interest, or at least a first step towards establishing a sort of balance between these two programmes of cognitive research in terms of awareness, the invested energy, as well as the breadth and depth of research



efforts, has only recently become noticeable, chiefly towards the end of the 1990s. If metaphor research still dominates the field, it is not surprising that studies of the role of metonymy in grammar are also so few and far between. But even if one takes into account the above asymmetry between the two research programmes, research on grammatical aspects of metonymy is visibly underrepresented. In fact, the role of metonymy in grammar, just like its pragmatic aspects in discourse, is virtually a virgin territory. The bulk of studies on metonymy that are not concerned with defining the phenomenon and contrasting it with metaphor, or with the interaction between the two, have focused on lexical aspects of metonymy, particularly on the issue of metonymy-induced polysemy.

A number of works of typological provenance on grammaticalization processes have invoked metonymy as an explanatory principle, but on closer inspection it turns out that the concept of metonymy used there is, without much exaggeration, only tangential to the concept of metonymy as we know it in cognitive linguistics. Rather, the term is used in the broadest possible sense to include all kinds of contiguity, including the rather diachronic phenomenon of physical contiguity, i.e. the consistent appearance of adjacent elements leading to one of the elements taking over the role of the other, and thus to the suppression and disappearance of the latter (cf. Traugott and König 1991, Bybee et al. 1994 for such alternative accounts of the development of modal expressions).

Grammatical aspects of metonymy as a conceptual contiguity have only recently come to the fore of attention. Among the pioneering studies are Heine (1995), Goossens (1999), Panther and Thornburg (1999a and b and 2000), Barcelona (1999) and Ruiz de Mendoza and Pérez Hernández (2001).

In the remaining part of the present paper I examine the role of metonymy in the English TENSE-ASPECT-MOOD system. The phenomena to be discussed show that the metonymic operations at play in this system form an orderly and internally coherent system.

### 3. The role of metonymy in the English TENSE-ASPECT-MOOD system

In terms of their function, the most common type of metonymies are referential ones, where one referring expression, usually a noun phrase, is the vehicle for an implied target that is also a referring expression normally realized as a noun phrase. Cf. the following example from the screenplay of “Annie Hall” by Woody Allen:

(5) There’s Henry Drucker. He has *a chair* in history at Princeton.

Oh, the short man is Hershel Kaminsky. He has *a chair* in philosophy at Cornell.

Here the referring expression *chair* is used to substitute another referring expression, something like *the position of being in charge of a university department*. It is a lexicalized metonymy since its meaning has become conventionalized and is part of mental lexicons of a sizeable number of native speakers of English (and is therefore recorded in most dictionaries of English). The etymology of the word and the source of the metonymic



relationship, ultimately deriving from Latin *cathedra*, are actually lost on many people using it. Some other metonymies have become conventionalized without shedding the transparent link between metonymic and non-metonymic meaning, e.g. the names of localities used to refer to governments or other political bodies, as in examples (2) a. and (4).

Another possible reason for the bias towards nouns and nominal expression in metonymy research, apart from the undeniable fact that they are indeed statistically speaking most frequent among lexicalized metonymies, may be the wording of the classical definition of metonymy that specifies that metonymy is a kind of substitution of the name of a thing by the name of another thing. As nouns are the word class used to name things, the fixedness of metonymy research on nouns, and the concomitant assumption of an almost isomorphic relationship between the form and function of metonymies, i.e. nouns functioning as referential metonymies, seems almost natural.

However, things are much more complicated than this, as metonymies can have other functions as well (cf. Panther and Thornburg 1999a and b). In the present section, I show that verbs can also be used metonymically and that they have a different function then, viz. they function as predicational metonymies. Consider first the following set of examples containing *meet*, a verb that denotes some sort of (more or less) physical contact:

- (6) a. His hand *met* hers.
- b. I'll *meet* him tomorrow.
- c. Let's *meet* for a drink.
- d. Have I *met* you before?
- e. Ivanišević *met* Agassi in last year's semi-finals.

Note that *meeting* presupposes two or more entities in motion towards each other, or one in motion towards the other, so that as the result of this movement they are at the same place at the same time, and as a consequence they may be physically joined for at least a moment. This is the sense of *meet* in (6) a. In (6) b.-e. *meet* is much richer in meaning because it is used to describe a more complex event, only the initial stage and precondition of which is actually mentioned. In (6) b. *meet* is used to refer to coming together formally (by arrangement) in order to discuss something. In (6) c. the contact is again arranged but in this instance for social purposes. In (6) d. meeting implies seeing and getting to know somebody, i.e. being introduced to someone. Finally, in (6) e. meeting presupposes playing or fighting together as opponents in a contest. Such predicational metonymies of the SUBEVENT-FOR-THE-WHOLE-EVENT are relatively frequent, particularly as verbo-nominal expressions or idiomatic structures:

- (7) a. Let's *go to the movies*.
- b. They finally *went to the altar*.



Metonymy can, however, be involved in verbal constructions in much less conspicuous ways. In what follows, we shall consider how a series of conceptual metonymies is involved in the TAM system of English.

Radden and Kövecses (1999: 33) note the occurrence of PART-FOR-WHOLE time metonymies in the tense system of English (and other languages), specifically instantiated as PRESENT-FOR-HABITUAL when the Present Tense is used to refer to habitual events, as in:

- (8) Mary speaks Spanish.

They also note the existence of ACTUALITY-FOR-POTENTIALITY metonymy as in:

- (9) He is an angry person. ('he can be angry')

which is the reverse of the POTENTIALITY-FOR-ACTUALITY metonymy found by Thornburg and Panther (1997) and Panther and Thornburg (1999a) to be operative in the mood system:

- (10) a. I *can see* your point.  
b. They *were able to* come after all. (... and they actually did come)

It is my contention that the use of the Present Tense for habitual and timeless situations can be linked to, and in fact motivated by, this reversible pair of metonymies, and that, in the consequence, the TAM system of English is structured and made more coherent by a multi-tiered system of related metonymies.

First, we note that the English tense system can be described by making use of at least three points in time: the situation time, the time of communication (or the speech time) and the reference time (or the point of orientation). The label time, or point in time, should, however, in certain cases be understood to refer to periods of time and not just single points in time, particularly when we talk about situation time. This is most obviously necessary when we refer to the time of situation that is a state or process. We can say that this is also a case of metonymic extension where a point in time stands for a period of time (of which it is a constitutive element).

Basically the same conceptual process is operative in the extension of the present tense to timeless, universal as well as to habitual uses, i.e. one moment in time standing for many moments/all time. The verb form actually used (i.e. the fact that it is the non-past member in the two-tense system of English) makes explicit reference only to the present time, and thus establishes a point of reference which is simultaneous with the speech time. This may be illustrated with the following two exchanges from the screenplay of "Annie Hall" by Woody Allen:





- (11) ANNIE: Yeah... so, listen - you *drive*?  
 ALVY: *Do I drive*? Uh, no, I gotta - I gotta problem with driving.  
 ANNIE: Oh, you do?  
 ALVY: Yeah. I got, uh, I got a license but I have too much hostility.
- (12) ANNIE: Oh, you *see* an analyst?  
 ALVY: Y-y-yeah, just for fifteen years.

The metonymic relationship linking the time explicitly referred to by the tense form and the time period (all time, present, past and future) that is actually implied does not reside exclusively in grammar proper but is rather made possible by some more or less universal pragmatic inferences. We can rightly say that this is an instantiation of a part-for-whole relationship, specifically, PRESENT-FOR-ALL-TIME metonymy. Although timeless and habitual uses of the present tense are very common, they can nevertheless be considered extensions, or derived uses.

For these inferences to work properly, the conceptual metonymy in question seems to need to be bolstered by the other metonymy found in the TAM system. Note that in examples like (8), Mary does not actually need to be talking all the time. Her linguistic capability is an acquired skill that is actually made use of only from time to time and is otherwise just potential. However, the form of the verb used indicates actuality although the metonymic target is just potentiality. Note that evidence that potentiality is targeted crops up in the dialogue in (11) when Alvy explains that he has a licence.

It is claimed in Brdar and Brdar-Szabó (2000) and Brdar-Szabó and Brdar (2002) that predicative adjectives may stand metonymically for verbs of linguistic action due to a specific instance of the MANNER-FOR-LINGUISTIC-ACTION metonymy. There are dozens of other adjectives referring to the manner of an implicit linguistic action, such as: *clear*, *open*, *short*.

- (13) a. Wolf, the president, I think, was exquisitely *clear* when he said right from the beginning, we will go after these terrorists and we will draw no distinction between them and the countries that harbor them and give them aid and comfort.  
 b. Jacobson is not *explicit* about the relation between perception and production, talking instead in terms of the acquisition of distinctive features.

The linguistic expression coding these non-basic events is the ascriptive construction. This is an independently established and well-entrenched construction, belonging to the basic stock of constructions in many languages. We might, however, ask ourselves why English bothers to burden these constructions with an additional meaning, if it can perhaps code linguistic action in a way that admittedly requires more words most of the time, i.e. by means of various paraphrases involving verbs and appropriate adverbial modifiers.

The effect of talking about the manner of performing an activity in terms of a property of its performer makes it possible to get at least two things for the price of one. What these



constructions make possible on the one hand is to talk about the subject, i.e. the implied performer of the activity, in that a given property is ascribed to him or her, and at the same time to qualify this activity.

The property ascribed is thus relativized in the sense that it is no longer seen as a permanent or inherent property but rather made more temporary due to the fact that the activities targeted by the metonymy do not/cannot take place all the time. Using this construction the speaker thus succeeds in shifting the focus from the activity towards the performer and in keeping it somewhere in the middle. In other words, potentiality is again presented in terms of actuality.

In Brdar and Brdar-Szabó (2000), we claim that this ascriptive construction creates a system that partly runs parallel to the TAM system in the traditional sense, and partly complements it. It is well known that the resources of the English TAM system allow the speaker to refer to actual, more generalized or only potential situations, but there are certain limits. One can thus refer to a potential event using the present simple tense (the so-called habitual or timeless use of the present, as shown above), but it would be difficult to express reference to a potential event in the past.

Ascriptive constructions with adjectival predicates derived from, or related to verbs, are a useful device to refer to more generic states of affairs regardless of the time reference. A subsequent attachment of a complement to the adjective may produce the effect of particularizing the situation and make the predicate again refer to a more specific and immediate situation while still retaining some degree of generality. This is why we see this system as complementing the system of verbal predicates.

It is a conveniently vague way of referring to both the event and the subject's propensity for performing at the same time. It is also claimed there that such constructions may also be examples of multi-tiered metonymies. Some of these English copular constructions where adjectives are morphologically derived from or related to verbal predicates may have arisen through metonymic extensions of a very general type, where PROPENSITY-FOR-EVENT metonymy is a more specific case of STATE-FOR-EVENT metonymy.

- (14) a. Other ladies were *critical*.  
b. Other ladies were *critical of her*.  
c. Other ladies *criticized her*.

Basically the same situation obtains in extended ascriptive constructions with adjectives that are not derived from verbs. The extended ascriptive construction itself coerces an event interpretation (cf. Panther and Thornburg 1999b). Its gradual conventionalization results in polysemy.

To recapitulate, the starting point for the metonymic extension is the basic ascriptive construction with predicative adjectives which can be derived from or related to verbal predicates, or can be primary adjectives, i.e. be simple and morphologically unrelated to verbs or other predicative expressions. This basic ascriptive construction serves as the



input for STATE-FOR-EVENT or STATE-FOR-(POTENTIAL-)ACTIVITY metonymy, and the resulting construction in turn serves as the input for more specific metonymic extensions, which may be prompted by the addition of some phrases or clauses functioning as complements of adjectives, or as adjuncts.

Finally, what seems to unify all these phenomena and the whole system of metonymies identified here is that the habitual and timeless uses of tense forms in part lie outside the bounds of the tense proper as they have to do with an event's being presented as grounded in reality or potentiality, and thus present a link with the domain of aspectuality and modality.

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#### MOTIVACIJA METONIMIJOM U ENGLESKOJ GRAMATICI: NA PRIMJERU GLAGOLSKOG SUSTAVA VREMENA, VIDA I NAČINA

Uvriježeno je mišljenje da metonimija ne igra gotovo nikakvu ulogu izvan leksičkog sustava, te je uglavnom irelevantna u gramatičkom opisu. U radu se pokazuje upravo suprotno – da metonimija ima dalekosežne posljedice po gramatički sustav. Dokumentirajući ulogu metonimije u motivaciji nekih pojava u sustavu vremena, vida i načina engleskih glagola, pokazuje se da metonimijska preslikavanja tvore uređen i koherentan sustav.

